

StarTribune.com | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA**Henry Miller: GOP convention can be a boon for Twin Cities**

It's a chance to tell the area's story. The events needn't dwell only on the delegates, and the benefits needn't end when the week is over.

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Minneapolis and St. Paul have an exciting challenge ahead as they plan for the 2008 Republican National Convention, and New York City's experience with political conventions illuminates the opportunity. The challenge is to take full advantage of the media presence to tell the Twin Cities' story while ensuring that security considerations come first.

As host of the 2004 Republican National Convention, New York understandably took a very conservative approach. The goal of the event, so soon after 9/11, was simply a safe convention. The key message was that New York was back in business and thriving. The focus of the city's attention was on security, and most of its hosting resources were spent within the secured zone surrounding Madison Square Garden.

In 1992, for the Democratic National Convention, the city took a decidedly different approach. That convention, occurring before even the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, embraced the city. Events were held in all five boroughs, and three of them still occur annually, promoting New York 15 years later.

Those events, created by New York '92, the public-private hosting organization, are:

- Restaurant Week (which began by offering delegates and New Yorkers a \$19.92 prix fixe lunch at premier restaurants throughout the city).
- Broadway on Broadway, the first free outdoor concert by the Broadway theaters, held in Times Square with VIP seating for delegates and a first-time audience of 50,000 New Yorkers.
- Fashion Week, which started in 1992 as "New York is Fashion" and has grown into a world-renowned celebration.

The contrast reflects the range of options available to Minneapolis and St. Paul. The question will be: How effectively can the two cities promote themselves while still making security the utmost priority?

Both cities will benefit from the St. Paul or Minneapolis datelines that will appear on coverage by the media, which can be expected to send 15,000 representatives. But the

dateline doesn't tell a story, and both cities have great stories to tell. A few lessons from 1992 may help with the planning.

First, the more the people of Minneapolis and St. Paul can participate in the hosting, the easier it will be for them to see that they -- and not just the delegates and other attendees -- are the beneficiaries. Being host of a national political convention typically has two immediate benefits: the national and global media coverage, which (if the hosting goes well) should be positive, and the short-term economic benefits to hotels, caterers, and others.

While those benefits are real and can be shown to far outweigh the cost of hosting the event, most residents don't experience them firsthand. And some local businesses will inevitably benefit less than they expect.

Therefore it's worth thinking about ways of involving the broader public, even if the benefits take place after the convention is over.

In 1992, for instance, New York's Restaurant Week was built around the convention but was extended throughout the summer, making its benefits more accessible to all New Yorkers.

Second, lasting benefits can come from organizing hosting events around key industry groups that need to promote themselves. In New York in 1992, the hosting effort focused on the restaurant and fashion industries and the Broadway theaters. By telling their stories, New York '92 not only promoted attributes of the city that were intrinsic to it but laid the groundwork for events whose ongoing value would make it possible for those industries to sustain them annually. That, in turn, produced a long-term economic benefit.

Minneapolis and St. Paul are beautifully situated to benefit similarly. They could, for instance, develop an event promoting theater in the Twin Cities -- with the key message that the two cities have more theater seats per capita than any U.S. city other than New York. Hosting events could be held at theaters in both cities -- from the Guthrie to the Hennepin Avenue Theater District to the Fitzgerald. And those events could be highlighted by the presence of well-known entertainers with close ties to Minneapolis and St. Paul -- from Bob Dylan and Prince to Mary Tyler Moore and Garrison Keillor.

Those events might be open only to delegates, but there might be a related monthlong promotion offering, for example, discounted tickets if you bring a friend from another state. The potential is enormous.

Another promotion could focus on the cities' spectacular architecture. Hosting events could be housed in the most striking contemporary or historic buildings, and a longer-term promotion could again be offered to the public at those same facilities. Renowned architects with local ties, such as Frank Gehry, could be asked to participate as well.

Minneapolis and St. Paul have enormous strengths with which to work. It's those

strengths -- more than the convention itself -- that make the hosting opportunity so exciting. With proper planning, the Twin Cities can benefit for years to come.

Henry Miller, chief operating officer of Goodman Media International, was CEO of New York '92.

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